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Pinyan Cottage

STATE MEMORIAL



STATE OF ILLINOIS



The Bryant Cottage at Bement holds a peculiar position in the picturesque history of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858. To understand its place in the story one looks back to June 16, 1858, when the Republican State Convention nominated Abraham Lincoln as its "first and only candidate for United States Senator." His opponent would be the then incumbent Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln began his campaign the evening of his nomination as he delivered in the old State Capitol, now the Sangamon County Court House, his famous "House Divided" speech.

Senator Douglas, in Washington, instantly realized that he must wage a vigorous campaign for re-election for his third term as Senator. He returned to Chicago and on the evening of July 9 delivered the opening speech of his campaign from the balcony of the Tremont House. Lincoln was present but declined to speak, as it was Douglas' meeting; however, the next evening, from the same balcony, Lincoln addressed the people.

The two statesmen then shifted the locale of their campaign down-state, each appearing in Bloomington, July 16, with Douglas speaking and Lincoln declining as it was a Douglas meeting. The next day, July 17, the two men spoke in Springfield, Douglas in the B. S. Edwards grove and Lincoln in the old State House.

Lincoln returned to Chicago July 22 and was again a Tremont House guest. From this old-time hostelry, Lincoln wrote a letter to Douglas formally challenging him to a series of nine debates, one each in the then Illinois Congressional districts. Douglas reluctantly accepted the challenge, but suggested that since each candidate had spoken in Chicago and Springfield, that the series be shortened to seven and Lincoln accepted the amended program. Then began a colorful campaign through the counties of Central Illinois. Each spoke in Clinton July 27, and July 28, and met again either in Clinton or Decatur.

Lincoln and Douglas met on the highway about a mile and a half south of Monticello the afternoon of July 29, as each had a speaking appointment in the Piatt county seat. The two men conferred on the highway where a pyramid and plaque stand today commemorating this famous roadside conference. Lincoln then hurried on to Monticello, where Douglas had already spoken, to make a speech.

At this point "The Bryant Cottage" in Bement enters the story. The cottage was erected in 1856 by Francis E. Bryant. He was a first cousin of William Cullen Bryant, the poet,

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and of the latter's three brothers, Arthur, John and Cyrus Bryant, leading pioneer citizens of Princeton, Illinois, where their descendants still reside.

Francis E. Bryant was an intimate friend of Senator Douglas and was deeply interested in the campaign. Politics involving the slavery problem and threatened secession were at white-heat. Mr. Bryant invited Senator and Mrs. Douglas to be his guests the two days they were in the Monticello-Bement area. They were Mr. Bryant's "house-guests" July 29 and 30, 1858.

There was no railroad in Monticello at that time, so it was necessary for Lincoln to return to Bement, to take the Great Western, now the Wabash, train to Springfield. Tradition has it that on the evening of July 29 Lincoln and Douglas conferred in the Bryant Cottage and Lincoln caught the midnight train from Bement to Springfield. The next morning, from the Bryant Cottage, Douglas wrote a letter to Lincoln confirming the full schedule of the seven debates to be held at the following places: Ottawa, La Salle County, August 21; Freeport, Stephenson County, August 27; Jonesboro, Union County, September 15; Charleston, Coles County, September 18; Galesburg, Knox County, October 7; Quincy, Adams County, October 13; and Alton, Madison County, October 15.

Other details regarding the debates were in the Douglas letter written from the Bryant Cottage. Lincoln replied in a brief note from Springfield, dated July 31, and accepted all details. "I accede and thus close the arrangement," wrote Lincoln in his characteristic few words. Here in the heart of the great Corn Belt of Illinois were settled the details of the great debates, which while again giving Douglas the senatorship, focused national attention upon Lincoln and led to his nomination and election as president of the United States.

Francis E. Bryant served two periods, one before and one after the Civil War, in the Illinois General Assembly. He first represented the Rushville-Quincy district, and following the war, the Piatt-Champaign district. In 1856 he removed from Rushville, where he located in 1837, to Bement to become active as a merchant and established the first bank, and was a leading citizen until his death in 1889. As a member of the General Assembly in 1868, he worked for the initial \$60,000 appropriation for the Illinois Industrial University, now the University of Illinois.

The Bryant Cottage has remained in the Bryant-Sprague families throughout more than 90 years. It has never been transferred in its title, aside from inheritance, until Mrs. Lily Sprague, the donor of the cottage, with her son, Bryant Sprague, conveyed it to the State of Illinois for a permanent historical shrine.

The State of Illinois maintains the Cottage in its original condition as one of its outstanding Lincoln memorials. The Cottage is open to the public from 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. daily.

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